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PHIL ROSENTHAL

Is America ready for 'Oscar and Me'?

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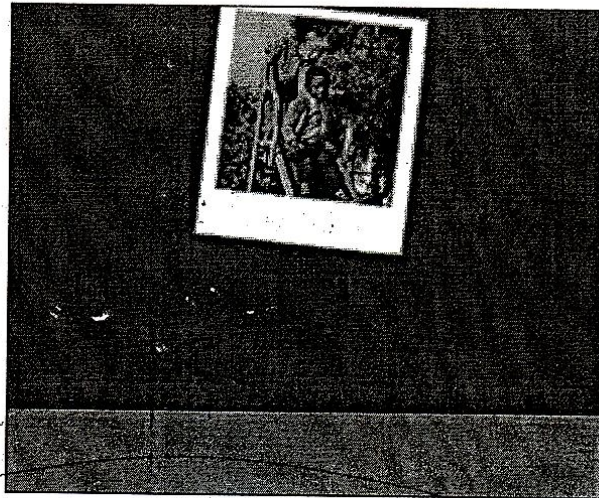
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ASPEN, Colo. -- Give rabble-rouser filmmaker Michael Moore unfettered access to a live television audience of many millions around the world -- at least until the orchestra drowns him out -- and you've got an explosive combination volatile enough to cause some people to tremble at just the thought of it.

Even Moore.

"For God's sake, don't vote for this film!" said

Moore, a metaphorical bomb-thrower from the left who could find himself at the podium accepting an Academy Award on March 23 if "Bowling for Columbine," his comedic yet pointed take on gun-control, racism and fear in America, somehow wins the Best Documentary prize.



"Don't put me on the stage on the Oscar show, on live TV. I think that's big mistake. I want to take an ad out in Variety and plead with Academy voters, 'Do not vote for this film!' It is a critical mistake to put me live on that stage."

Moore hastened to add he is joking, but the concern is real and justified.

You're never sure exactly whose ox will be gored when he opens his mouth, as he proved at the just-concluded HBO-sponsored U.S. Comedy Arts Festival, where he was honored with a Freedom of Speech Award by the First Amendment Center.

"He's more than a filmmaker," said Joe Lockhart, the former Clinton White House press secretary, who engaged Moore in a Q&A session. "He's a journalist, a comedian. He's a provocateur. He's an activist, and to much of corporate America, he's the scariest man alive. ... Most people love him. Some people hate him. But no one can deny the power of Michael Moore's work."

Actually, Moore questions his own power, and considers "Roger & Me," the film that launched him into the national spotlight, a failure because it failed to save the General Motors jobs of his hometown, Flint, Mich., which continues to spiral downward as a result.

It's also debatable just how many people truly love Moore. While his films all have made money, neither "TV Nation," which ran on NBC and then Fox, nor "The Awful Truth" on Bravo drew much of a crowd on television and commercial television is nothing if not a popularity contest. His satire is sharp, smart and generally entertaining, but it's not everyone's cup of soy-milk latte. Even he describes himself as left of the liberal standard-bearers in this country.

"We started doing 'TV Nation' in '93, and I just thought, geez, we're too ahead of the curve here ... nobody is listening to this," Moore said. "We [had] just finished 12 long, dark years of Reagan and Bush, the elected Bush. ... To be pointing out how things really hadn't changed that much and in some ways were actually getting worse for those who are the have-nots in our society, I think people just didn't want to hear that probably at that time."

Moore took the occasion of the comedy festival to call out CBS' Dan Rather, accusing Rather of learning U.S. postwar plans to divvy up the oil fields of Iraq over a dinner with Russian president Vladimir Putin but supposedly sitting on the story. Over at CBS News, where they're still taking flak from the right over last week's Saddam Hussein interview, the reaction to this salvo from the left was dumfounded puzzlement. Rather never has had dinner with Putin, a spokeswoman said.

"Most of us are raised, 'Geez, don't try anything new, because if you [screw] up a lot, it's embarrassing, first of all, [and] you don't want to look like a jerk,' " Moore said, describing his approach to filmmaking and probably everything else. "I didn't care really because I've always felt like I look like a jerk anyway."

He got his start as a teenager in Michigan, winning a state speech contest sponsored by the Elks Club. The speeches in the contest were to be about the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. Moore won the competition--judged by high school teachers and not Elks members -- by excoriating the club for still, at that late date, admitting only whites, a policy reversed soon after Moore's victory gained national attention.

Moore thinks it's unlikely he will get to give a speech on Oscar night. "I'm going to, you know, sit there and lose," he said.

The nomination is, in its own way, kind of amazing, but not nearly so much so as the fact that he gets the kind of big corporations and media magnates he loves to attack--such as General Electric, Rupert Murdoch, Disney and Kirk Kerkorian-- to subsidize and distribute his work.

"The irony is never lost on me," said Moore. "They're doing it because they're in the business of making money, and I make them money. ... And I'm doing it because, through these large media entities, I'm hoping to reach as many people as possible.

"What's always kind of bothered me about this equation ... is that I think they know that ultimately it's not a dangerous act to put Michael Moore out there. They are so convinced that they've done such a good job of dumbing down the minds of the American public, that the public, when they watch 'TV Nation' or 'The Awful Truth' or this movie on DVD or whatever, will laugh, they'll cry and they'll turn it off and switch it to, you know, 'Help Me, I'm a Celebrity--Get Me Off This Island!' or whatever that new show is."

Cue the orchestra.